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ABSTRACT

Insights are offered into how speech, melody, and rhythm dramatize the differences in the construction and interpretation of music for Africa and America. Intended for use in instructing American students about African music, the learning module relates music to traditional African culture and maintains that the music is at the same time functional, religious, and secular. The musical selections in the booklet focus on the inflectionary character of the Nigerian Yoruba language and the proverbial nature of most African songs, in which speech, melody, rhythm, and dance are interrelated. The multidimensional character of African music is portrayed through singing and dancing exercises, including a Yoruba rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." The following questions, with suggested answers, are offered as a framework for teaching: (1) how does African music compare and contrast with American music? (2) how does music function in traditional African societies? (3) how has African music influenced American music? and (4) how has American music influenced African music? Several classroom enrichment activities and a bibliography are included. (Author/DB)

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AFRICAN MUSIC IN AN AMERICAN CONTEXT

- Adapted from material provided by
Samuel Ekpe Akpabot, Michigan State
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Music is intimately and inextricably bound up with African life. It is at one and the same time functional, religious and secular. Africans need music. They are born into it and live their lives deeply immersed in it. Thus, traditional African culture is intensely musical.

Proverbs vividly reflect the African philosophy of life. They teach moral values, express wit and comment on the state of things - everything! Speech, melody, rhythm and dance are usually interrelated in African music. The interrelationship permits the dancer to take his cue from the instruments and for a melody to be fashioned from a sentence.

Many African languages are inflectionary in character, producing high, medium and low tones; thus, among the Nigerian Yoruba, the word Oko (pronounced or-kor) can mean:

Husband : with the same (medium) inflection on both vowels;

Hoe : with the first vowel medium and the second high;

Boat : with the first vowel high and the second low.

These three words can be represented musically, thus:

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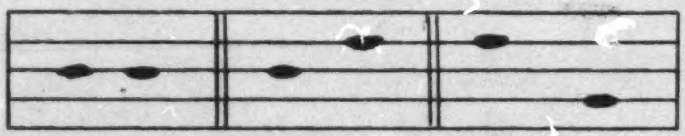

O - KO (Husband) [Hel - lo]

O - KO (Hoe) [Hel - lo]

O - KO (Boat) [Hel - lo]

Americans make less use of tone (inflection) in our language but it does occur. Take, for example, the word, "hello".

1. Hello : with the same (medium) inflection on both vowels;

2. Hello : with the first vowel medium and the second high;

3. Hello : with the first vowel high and the second low. (see above)

Each "hello" has a meaning which is similar and at the same time different. "Hello" (1) means "How are you?", "Hello" (2) means "Am I glad to see you!", and "Hello" (3) means "really I couldn't care less."

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African Music in an American Context...

There are other words where both the meanings of the terms and the inflection vary. Project (project), rebel (rebel), record (record), are examples. Can you think of others?

"Where are you going?" can be inflected to suggest different meanings:

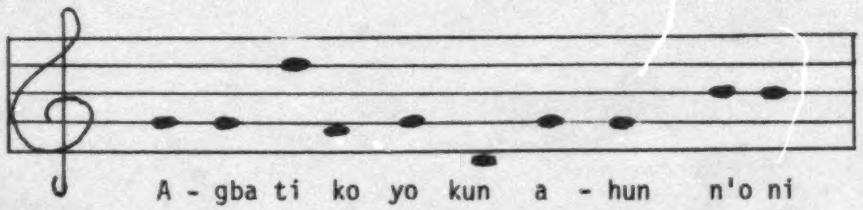
1. Where are you going?

2. Where are you going?

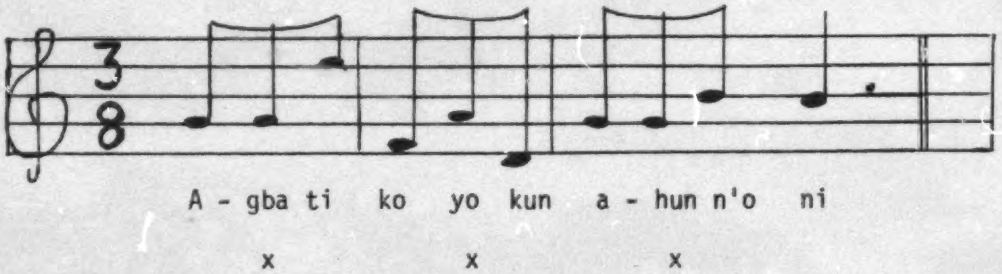
3. Where are you going?

"Where are you going?" (1) questions the destination. "Where are you going?" (2) challenges the actor, and "Where are you going?" challenges the appropriateness of the time of the action.

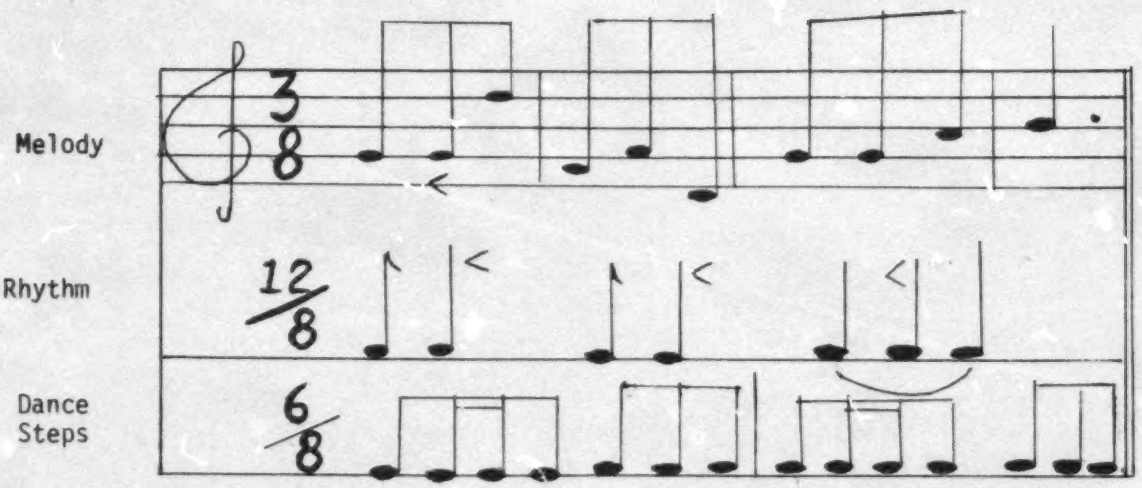
Among the Yoruba of Nigeria there is a proverb which says, "an important man in the community without a pot belly is a stingy man". The proverb in the Yoruba language is "Agba ti ko yo jun ahun n'o ni." It can be represented musically to form the melody:



By repeating the sentence with the correct accent on certain words (marked "x"), a natural tempo in triple time (three beats to a measure) can be established:



Accentuating beats is also an important part of the music experience. Students can practice the sentence "Where are you going?" as a starter, where each of three groups accents by clapping hands the inflected word it has been assigned. Making the transition to our Yoruba proverb is, then, infinitely easier. We can clap rhythmically or play an accompanying rhythm, with triangles, gongs, tambourines, etc. The accents on the marked words will produce a variation of a rhythm used throughout Africa known as the bell rhythm because it is usually associated with a gong.



Finally, we can work out a dance sequence, whose style would depend on the tempo beats and the accent on the words of the song. A traditional dance pattern that makes use of this type of rhythm among the Yoruba is called Sankara. Remind students that when swimming the breast stroke, several different movements are undertaken simultaneously. Rhythm, melody and dance steps performed together produce what we call polyrhythm.

As a concluding exercise, have students sing "twinkle, twinkle, little star", first - the words, then twinkling the fingers on the hands while singing, and finally, opening and closing the eyes in rhythm while twinkling the fingers, and singing, or Ten Little Indians, Pop Goes the Weasel, etc. Thus, the multi-dimensional character of African music is vividly portrayed.

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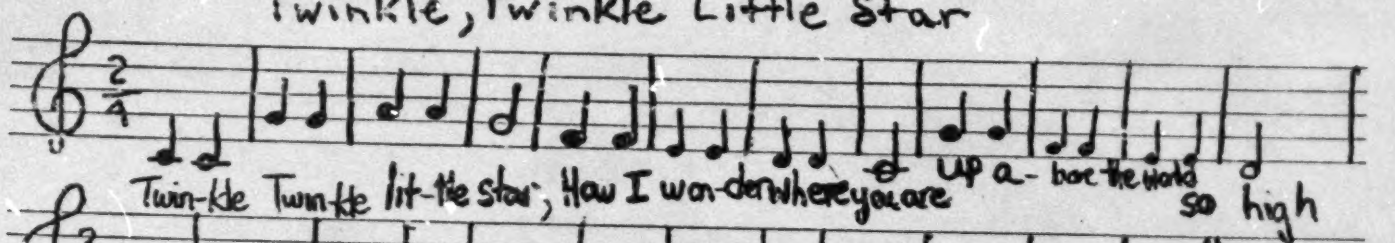
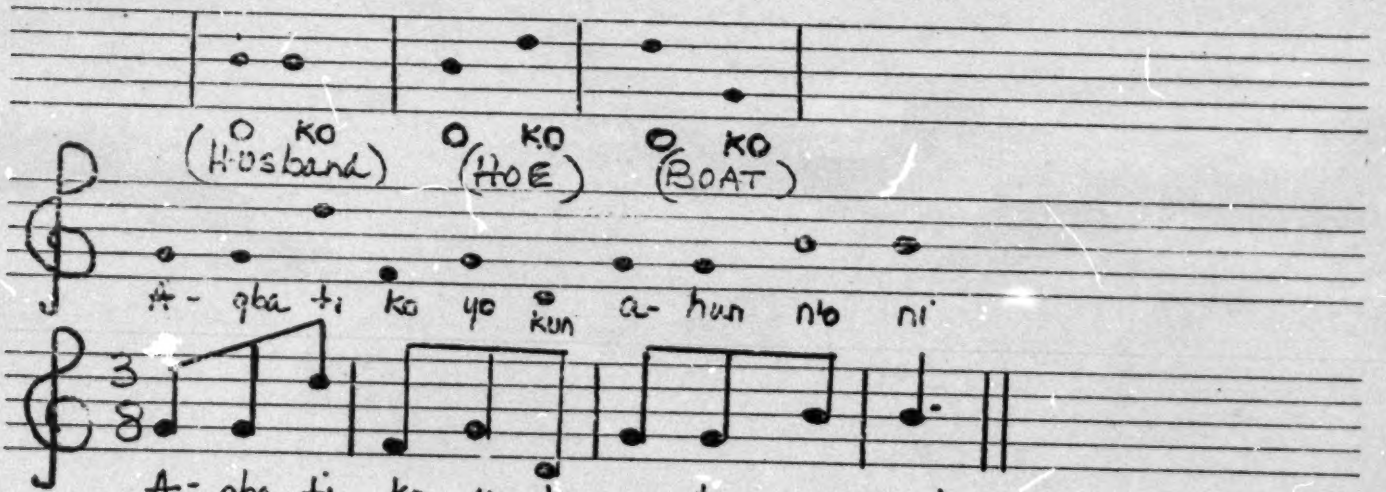
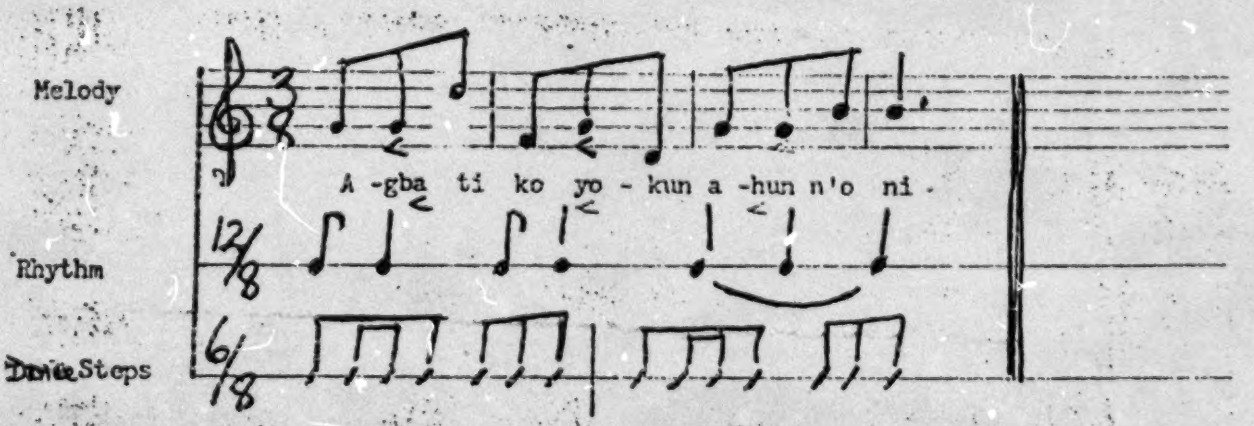
AFRICAN MUSIC IN AN AMERICAN CONTEXT

Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star


Twin-kle Twin-kle lit-tle star, How I won-der where you are
Up a-bove the world so high
like a dia-mond in the sky
Twinkle Twinkle lit-tle star
How I wonder what you are.



AFRICAN MUSIC IN AN AMERICAN CONTEXT

- Lesson Plan -

1. How does African music compare with American music?

1. -Both have ceremonial functions.
   -Both provide insights into the culture.
   -Both use a variety of instruments.
   -Both encourage aesthetic pleasure.
   -Singing often accompanies listening (hearing).

2. How does African music differ from American music?

2. -Westerners generally listen to music.
   -Africans react to the rhythms with bodily movement interspersed with comments of approval or disapproval.
   -Audience and performer interact.
   -African music is improvisatory and handed down by oral tradition.
   -Western music is notated.
   -African music uses polyrhythms.
   -Western music uses a fixed rhythm , usually established at the start of the performance.
   -Most Western music uses a classical scale (c,d,e,f,g,a,b,c).
   -African music uses a whole tone scale, consisting of five, six or seven notes.

3. How does music function in traditional African societies?

3. -African songs generally tell a story. they are conceived in a call and response (solo and chorus) pattern.
   -A majority of Western songs are just for listening pleasure.
   -In African dancing gestures embroider and enact a story. Western dancing is mainly recreational.
   -Music and movement go together in African music. Western music is usually performed without any movement.

4. How has African music influenced American?

4. Blacks coming to the United States as slaves have developed jazz.
   Variations of jazz included "blues" and "soul". All have influenced musical forms which are associated with American music in its broadest terms.

5. How has American music influenced African music?

5. Highlife is popular African music, a synthesis of Western and African music. Basically vocal music, it is sung in a variety of African languages and occasionally in English.

6. Enrichment

Soul music is enjoyed in large parts of the continent. James Brown is perhaps Africa's most popular entertainer. Jim Reeves is also popular.	6. Play a Jim Reeves or James Brown record and explore the reasons why they are popular.
7. Western proverbs also have a cadence which can be expressed musically. Have students improvise with some!	7. -A stitch in time saves nine! -The better the day, the better the deed! -It rains on the just and the unjust., etc.

* * *

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